

M. Slaying 771

Chapter 771: Refining Steel with A Huge Fire

Everything happened so suddenly.

Jing Wuya and Liao Yuexian watched as chaos descended upon the room. They were unsure of what was happening, but there was one they knew for certain. Di Nufeng, who was standing before them, could kill them.

Without hesitation, Jing Wuya and Liao Yuexian joined forces and launched an attack on her.

Jing Wuya, clad in heavy armor, wasted no effort on flashy moves and simply threw a punch. However, that punch carried a force capable of crushing mountains into gravel. As that force surged forward, the floor beneath him cracked.

Ruuumble.

Liao Yuexian, on the other hand, pulled out a jade guqin, and her fingers flew across its strings. With a single resonant hum, invisible sonic blades tore through the air toward Di Nufeng.

Nevertheless, Di Nufeng was not the only person they were fighting.

Chu Liang immediately stepped in, brandishing his sword. He unleashed the Sword Strike of Severing the Void, intercepting Liao Yuexian's sonic blades and shielding his teacher.

Swoosh!

The two powerful waves of qi collided and scattered in all directions with unstoppable force, slicing through anything in their path.

Xue Lingxue dared not participate in a battle of such a high level. She quickly moved to safety, pulling along with her the three people that had been hidden under the bed. Simultaneously, she sent word to her teacher about Liao Yuexian's involvement, confident that the powerful members of her sect would soon arrive to aid them.

She possessed a Circle of Immortal Friends Token, but she couldn't create a private soul domain for her sect like Chu Liang had for Silver Sword Peak. This meant her sect's communication methods were far less convenient.

With Chu Liang holding Liao Yuexian back, Di Nufeng could focus entirely on Jing Wuya, and her approach was nothing short of direct. If he threw a punch, she would throw a punch right back.

With a fist engulfed in Samadhi True Fire, Di Nufeng struck forth with her fist, colliding forcefully with his oncoming iron-clad fist.

Boom!

Flames exploded outward, engulfing the palace in an inferno spanning hundreds of zhang.

Fortunately, the palace guards had evacuated the palace attendants earlier. Just the shockwaves resulting from the clash between the two Eminent Ones would have been enough to kill them.

The enchanted formations surrounding the royal bedchamber flared to life in defense. Nevertheless, under the overwhelming force of the duel, they quickly shattered one after another.

The collision of the two fists was so powerful that it sent Jing Wuya flying backward, causing his heart to shake in shock.

He had long heard tales of Di Nufeng, the ruthless and fearsome prodigy of the Mount Shu Sect. However, he had never imagined she would be this formidable. Strength-wise, they were evenly matched, but her Samadhi True Fire was truly incredible. He could already see a faint red glow spreading across the surface of his gauntlets.

Jing Wuya's Aoshan Divine Armor ranked ninety-first in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures. The nearly indestructible armor not only provided him with impenetrable defense but also enhanced his already incredible mountain-shifting strength. Combined with his immense cultivation power, Jing Wuya had rarely encountered an opponent of equal standing.

This was the first time he had faced such a fearsome foe at the seventh realm—one capable of forcing him into a disadvantageous position with a single punch.

Jing Wuya found Di Nufeng's appearance at the palace rather strange. In fact, everything that had occurred in the palace that day had been strange. He still hadn't figured out why there were three Han Lingshous.

Nevertheless, faced with the ferocious woman before him, Jing Wuya was already focusing on making a retreat.

Even so, this situation was like the saying, "The tree may wish for stillness, yet the wind does not relent." Jing Wuya wanted to flee, but the wind of chaos that was Di Nufeng would not let him.

In the blink of an eye, a blazing wall of purple-gold fire surged forth and blocked off every possible escape route Jing Wuya could take, leaving him utterly astonished.

Does this woman's Samadhi True Fire not cool down—like ever??

She can conjure the fire at will that effortlessly... and seemingly endlessly???

Every enemy who had faced Di Nufeng had once harbored the same thoughts, and most of them had shared the same ending.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Explosive noises blasted through the air as there was another round of collisions between fire-clad fists and iron-clad ones.

If it were slashes or heavy attacks, Jing Wuya's armor would be able to endure them without issue. However, the thing he was facing now just had to be Di Nufeng's divine fire—a fire so powerful that its heat could penetrate through the armor.

Before long, the searing heat had turned the Aoshan Divine Armor scorching hot. The heat that the Samadhi True Fire produced was not the same as that of ordinary flames. That huge fire was basically refining the armor into steel!

If this continued, perhaps the armor itself could hold out, but there was no way Jing Wuya could. Soon enough, he wouldn't be a man encased in iron; he'd be a man grilled on an iron plate.

Faced with imminent death, Jing Wuya exploded with rage. He gritted his teeth and roared, “Die!”

As Di Nufeng’s fist came toward him, Jing Wuya did not dodge. Instead, he fearlessly threw a punch at Di Nufeng’s waist.

Boom! Boom!

Two deafening impacts rang out at the same time.

Di Nufeng’s punch landed explosively on Jing Wuya’s head. His helmet and mask flew off—only to reveal there was nothing underneath.

Simultaneously, Jing Wuya’s fist struck the side of Di Nufeng’s ribs, sending her flying.

Nevertheless, he knew that one punch wouldn’t be enough to take her down.

From the empty neck of the armor, a beam of white light shot out and transformed into a small figure, darting away in a desperate escape.

It turned out that Jing Wuya was no towering warrior but a short man, the size of a child. He had hidden himself inside the massive suit of armor, using it as a disguise all along.

This was the one move Di Nufeng had not anticipated—which, to her, was a loss.

She watched as Jing Wuya fled as a beam of white light. By the time she had steadied her breathing enough to give chase, it was already too late.

Nonetheless, there was no frustration in her eyes.

Just as Jing Wuya looked like he was about to make his escape, clouds of qi surged and condensed ahead of him, forming a chilling beam of swordlight.

Splurt.

The swordlight severed Jing Wuya at the waist, and his blood sprayed down from the sky.

“AAAAHHHHH!!!”

Despite having lost half of his body, Jing Wuya was still alive. He flailed his arms wildly as he fell. A firm hand soon caught him in midair.

That hand belonged to none other than Daoist Yan of the Mount Shu Sect.

As it turned out, Chu Liang had warned Di Nufeng and Daoist Yan in advance that the enemy was cunning, and they had to be vigilant against any escape attempts. Thus, Di Nufeng led the assault, while Daoist Yan lay in wait to catch the enemy.

And sure enough, their strategy worked flawlessly.

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On the other side, Chu Liang's fight with Liao Yuexian was just as perilous. However, in this battle, it was the member of Silver Sword Peak who was in danger.

Chu Liang quickly realized that Liao Yuexian was no weaker than Jing Wuya. She might not have Jing Wuya's indestructible armor, but the strings of her guqin were just as deadly.

As she plucked the strings, a sharp hum filled the air. Numerous invisible sonic blades wove together into a massive net, engulfing Chu Liang in an instant.

Sensing the razor-sharp danger closing in, Chu Liang took action immediately. He raised the Demon-Slaying Sword and unleashed the Sword Strike of Severing the Void. He sliced through the web of sonic blades while using Dimension Compression to blink several meters away. Chu Liang barely managed to escape, but the next wave of sonic blades was already upon him.

When he fought the sea demons in the Ruins of Return, Chu Liang had felt like he was invincible among the seventh-realm Eminent Ones. Nonetheless, after fighting Jing Wuya and Liao Yuexian back-to-back, Chu Liang had to admit that his cultivation power was still lacking.

In truth, he had dominated the sea demons mainly because of the Demon-Slaying Sword's special power.

When fighting demonic creatures, the Demon-Slaying Sword's divine might would surge beyond its usual limits, allowing Chu Liang's strikes to be unstoppable. When fighting human cultivators, the special enhancement disappeared, making his attacks far less powerful.

That was why Chu Liang could only keep dodging as Liao Yuexian pursued him relentlessly over a hundred zhang. In this deadly exchange of sword qi and sonic blades, even the slightest misstep could cost him his life.

Just then, someone called out from the side. "Mother?!"

It was the Dragon Dancer, Liao Jingyue. She had just regained consciousness, only to see her mother engaged in battle.

Even though Liao Jingyue currently wore Han Lingshou's face, that one word from her made Liao Yuexian falter.

Liao Yuexian's gaze turned toward the source of the voice. "Jingyue?"

Chu Liang was closer to the group than Liao Yuexian, so he seized the opportunity to roll over there and swiftly fling out a talisman. A dense curtain of mist immediately rose, shrouding him and the others.

Liao Yuexian let out a cold snort, "Hmph! A petty trick."

With a flick of her fingers, the strings of her jade guqin vibrated, summoning a gust of wind that instantly swept away the mist.

However, what she saw left her dumbfounded.

Chu Liang had blended into the group. There were three identical Han Lingshous standing side by side, all with the exact same face.

The Han Lingshou on the left cried out, "Mother, stop fighting!"

The Han Lingshou in the middle echoed, "Mother, don't attack!"

The Han Lingshou on the right looked rather groggy like he had just woken from a long sleep. Rubbing his head, he glanced around him. Noticing how synchronized the other two Han Lingshous were, he felt completely out of place.

After hesitating for a moment, he asked, "Why is everyone calling her 'Mother'?"

Boom!

Liao Yuexian shot a blast of powerful qi at him, knocking him down.

Chu Liang's eyelid twitched. Bro, do you know why now?

Chapter 772: I Won't Let You Down! (I)

The two Han Lingshous still standing spoke in unison, desperately trying to persuade Liao Yuexian. "Mother, please stop fighting!"

Liao Yuexian's expression was stern as she asked, "Jingyue? Why are you here?"

"Mother, it's me! I came to persuade you to stop colluding with Jing Wuya... Stop aiding the wicked!" both Han Lingshous replied simultaneously, their words perfectly synchronized.

As soon as they finished, they turned to look at each other, mirroring each other's movements exactly. They both yelled, "Hey! Stop copying what I say!"

Logically, Liao Yuexian should know her daughter well, so she should be able to recognize Liao Jingyue just from her voice. However, Chu Liang's act was too convincing; his expressions and the way he spoke seemed the same as Liao Jingyue's. They were so identical that Liao Yuexian did not dare to attack one of them rashly, fearing she might choose wrongly.

Liao Jingyue stomped her foot in frustration. Unexpectedly, Chu Liang had anticipated her reaction and stomped even earlier than she did. At this point, it was like a copy moving ahead of the original.

"Haaa!" Liao Jingyue huffed in frustration.

She pulled out a treasured mirror and turned it over to reflect her. A bright light washed over her, stripping away the illusion and revealing her true appearance.

That mirror was the Mirror of Captured Light, the very treasure she had stolen from Jing Wuya.

Liao Yuexian's fierce gaze instantly locked onto Chu Liang.

Chu Liang was suddenly the only fake Han Lingshou left in the room. His disguise was pointless now.

He turned to Liao Yuexian and awkwardly spread his hands in a shrug. "Esteemed Senior, I was just playing a little joke on you."

Stepping in between them, Liao Jingyue pleaded, "Mother, please stop! Let's leave this place together!"

Liao Yuexian remained silent, her hostile gaze lingering on Chu Liang. It seemed she was conflicted about what she should do next.

Right then, someone called out, "Jing Yue!"

It was Hu Sanlang. He dashed into the room and threw his arms around Liao Jingyue, wrapping her in a tight embrace.

"Why are you here?" he asked.

"Sanlang..." Liao Jingyue uttered, her voice trembling as she leaned into him.

"You brat! Don't you touch Jingyue!" Liao Yuexian yelled.

She once again plucked the strings of her guqin, and a sharp hum filled the air. The vibrating force of the guqin's strings resonated through the room.

Hu Sanlang fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

Liao Jingyue rushed to help him. Then she turned back to yell at Liao Yuexian, "Mother, you're not allowed to hit Sanlang!"

Hu Sanlang, struggling to hold on, weakly grasped her hand and urged, "Jing Yue, don't yell at your mother."

As the emotional family drama unfolded, Liao Yuexian stared at Hu Sanlang as if he were a thieving raccoon caught stealing her watermelon. She wore an expression mixed with shock and fury.

Meanwhile, Chu Liang realized Liao Yuexian was completely ignoring him now, so he quietly took a few steps back.

Heh. Guess I'm just an extra now.

Who would have thought that Hu Sanlang would be so useful? He drew Liao Yuexian's hostility away from me.

Chu Liang was more than happy to let someone else keep Liao Yuexian occupied, so he snuck away. When he got to a comfortable distance from the room, he overlapped his arms in his sleeves and leisurely watched the drama unfold.

While Chu Liang was stalling for time earlier, Di Nufeng had already defeated Jing Wuya, and Daoist Yan followed up with a sword slash, cutting away half of Jing Wuya's already not-so-great height.

Then Daoist Yan landed at the palace, holding the remaining half of the now even shorter man. Liao Yuexian finally pulled her gaze away from Hu Sanlang, shock filling her eyes.

She hadn't expected the Mount Shu Sect to dispatch even an eighth-realm Eminent One—and so quickly at that.

After all, eighth-realm Eminent Ones were strategic assets in any immortal sect and were rarely deployed. If the eighth-realm Eminent Ones were to take action whenever something came up, the mortal world would eventually fall into chaos, and even these powerful figures wouldn't be able to handle the consequences.

It hadn't been long since the fights at the palace began, yet the Mount Shu Sect had already dispatched a master of the Heavenly Origin. Their response speed was truly astonishing. It wouldn't be easy for Liao Yuexian to escape now.

Of course, it wasn't strange at all that she was surprised by Daoist Yan's swift appearance. In the era of the Circle of Immortal Friends, the way that cultivators communicated was drastically different from before.

In the past, when cultivators encountered trouble, they would usually send out a divine-light transmission like Xue Lingxue had done earlier. It would take at least half a day for their sect to receive the message. If the sect chose to be cautious, they would send someone to investigate the matter first, wasting even more time before deploying one of their more powerful members.

However, things were different now. Just by thinking, Chu Liang had silently completed several rounds of information exchanges and summoned reinforcements in no time. The old-school cultivators, Jing Wuya and Liao Yuexian, had been caught off guard by their efficiency.

"Daoist Yan, Di Nufeng..." Liao Yuexian fixed her gaze on the two of them and spoke quietly. "What does this matter have to do with Mount Shu? Why are you interfering so far beyond your reach?"

She was slightly older than Daoist Yan and Di Nufeng, but they could still be considered as part of the same generation. They had known each other in their youth.

It had been many years since they last met, and it was unfortunate that their reunion had come under such circumstances.

Chu Liang stepped forward and spoke first. "If this were merely an internal conflict within the Fuyao Kingdom, then naturally, Mount Shu would have no involvement. But, Esteemed Senior, you impersonated a disciple of the South Melody Conservatory and colluded with the evildoers from the Celestial Charm Sect. You sought to plunge the South Melody Conservatory, one of the Terrestrial Ten, into chaos. Any immortal sect would have a duty to intervene."

"Hmph." Liao Yuexian glanced at him and let out a soft chuckle. "I'm guessing you must be Chu Liang. I've heard your name before. Seeing you today... you truly are quite the mystical character."

"You flatter me, Esteemed Senior," Chu Liang replied politely.

Xue Lingxue stepped forward, gazing at Liao Yuexian. She slowly said, "By seniority, I should call you Senior Aunt. But after losing the competition for the position of the conservatory master, you chose to exile yourself and collude with evildoers, committing evil alongside them. That was not the path you should have taken. Even if you had suffered some injustice back then, you should have —"

"There was no injustice," Liao Yuexian stated suddenly, interrupting Xue Lingxue.

Silence fell over the room.

A moment passed before Liao Yuexian spoke again. "Back then, I truly did fall in love with someone from a diabolical sect. That was no rumor."

She looked into the distance as she recalled the past. "I simply couldn't stand Yan Yingluo. From the moment she was born, she took everything from our generation of South Melody Conservatory disciples—admiration, fans, the position of head disciple, the position of conservatory master, the conservatory's Great Dao... Everything was hers."

Liao Yuexian clenched her fingers tightly. "For all these years, all I've wanted was to take back what rightfully belonged to me! What reason is there for everything to belong to her?"

"Mother..." Liao Jingyue looked at her mother's face, suddenly finding it rather unfamiliar. "That's not what you told me before..."

"I just didn't want you to know... that your father is a diabolical cultivator," Liao Yuexian said, turning her gaze to her daughter. "But I have no choice but to let you know now."

She suddenly raised her head and yelled toward the sky, "Lin Poyun! How much longer do you intend to wait before making your move?"

At her call, black clouds crackling with lightning gathered in the sky. In the next instant, a beam of light shot out from the clouds, opening up a rift. Then a massive hand reached out from it!

Liao Yuexian had likely possessed some kind of tracking jade talisman—an enchanted tool that could be crushed at a critical moment to call for aid.

As expected, a master of the Heavenly Origin, who had been waiting in midair, immediately descended to rescue her.

Could it be that the diabolical sect disciple she once loved was the current sect leader of the Dark King Sect, Lin Poyun?

As a well-informed undercover member of the Dark King Sect, Chu Liang knew quite a bit about this formidable figure. However, he had never heard any stories about his romantic entanglements.

Daoist Yan soared into the air and swung her Heavenly Cloud Ancient Sword, sending a mighty surge of sword qi into the sky!

Boom!

The massive hand descended, grabbing both Liao Yuexian and Liao Jingyue and pulling them upward. Simultaneously, a second hand emerged from the rift, clutching a mass of black clouds to block Daoist Yan's sword qi.

Yet, the black clouds were instantly slashed apart. Two of the massive hand's fingers were severed, dripping with blood as they dropped to the ground.

The sect leader of the Dark King Sect might have had a higher cultivation level than Daoist Yan, but because he had to protect both the Liao mother and daughter while descending across space, he had inevitably been at a disadvantage.

A voice rang out from the rift, speaking slowly and deliberately. "The past grievances between Mount Shu and me, along with this new grudge of losing two fingers—I will get my revenge for them."

As the two massive hands withdrew into the rift, the dark clouds gradually closed up. Then they dissipated in a flash.

Chu Liang hadn't expected this at all. He couldn't help but feel a little regretful as he watched the mother and daughter vanish.

Of course, his regret wasn't because he had been determined to capture them. Rather, it was that he really wanted the Mirror of Captured Light. The mysterious treasure was not recorded in the Catalog of the Mortal World's Ten Thousand Treasures, but it had extraordinary abilities.

Nevertheless, he could likely get the answers to his questions about this mysterious treasure from Jing Wuya.

Chu Liang turned to look at Jing Wuya. Daoist Yan was holding him like he was a dead chicken.

Just like what had happened to the Violet Gold Marquess in the lead-up to his death, Jing Wuya's wounds kept emitting a golden radiance; his body was trying to heal itself. However, the residual sword qi from Daoist Yan's strike lingered within his wounds, preventing any regeneration.

This man had been operating in the Fuyao Kingdom for years, with connections to the Penglai Supreme Sect, the Celestial Charm Sect, and other diabolical sects. It would undoubtedly be far more valuable to extract information from him than to simply kill him.

By now, a large number of soldiers and cultivators from the Fuyao Kingdom's Royal Wave Bureau had gathered outside the palace walls, but none of them had dared to interfere while the Eminent Ones had been fighting.

Now that the battle was over, a commotion broke out among the people outside the palace.

Lin Bei's voice was among them.

It seemed that Han Lingshou had returned to the palace.

Chapter 773: I Won't Let You Down! (II)

Chu Liang thought of something, and he quickly said, "Senior Aunt Yan, you take him and hurry back to Mount Shu. We'll wrap things up here."

Upon hearing this, Yan Zi prepared to leave.

However, before she could depart, a radiant seven-colored cloud suddenly flew over from the east. It floated down to the ground in a flash.

As the cloud of qi dispersed, it revealed a middle-aged man clad in a dragon-patterned Daoist robe. His skin bore purple-blue markings, faintly resembling dragon scales. Bright flames danced in the vertical pupils of his eyes, shining with the intense glow of spiritual power.

"It's Immortal Cangqiu!"[1]

A wave of exclamations rippled through the crowd that had gathered some distance away from the palace. Their voices were filled with reverence as if they were witnessing an immortal descend from the heavens.

Haaaaaa, Chu Liang sighed inwardly. I guess it was bound to happen at some point. The Penglai Sect showed up at just the right moment.

Chu Liang had heard of Daoist Cangqiu before. He was an eighth-realm Eminent One, Daoist Cangsheng's junior brother, and one of the highest-ranking figures in the Penglai Supreme Sect. He wielded immense authority in the sect, overseeing the East Sea's island kingdoms and their immortal sects as well as the various beautiful hidden paradises.

As Daoist Cangqiu landed, he scanned the area before directing a cold gaze at Daoist Yan. He then questioned, "Fellow Daoists of Mount Shu, why have you come to stir up trouble in the East Sea?"

Daoist Yan replied nonchalantly, "We aren't the ones causing the trouble. There were people of the Fuyao Kingdom colluding with the Celestial Charm Sect to sow chaos. We simply intervened to uphold justice."

Chu Liang knew better than to try and get involved when the two eighth-realm Eminent Ones were conversing. Only those of the same cultivation realm could engage in discussions like that.

"The Fuyao Kingdom is a close neighbor of Penglai's. They have always given us a lot of support. If something happens here, it should be handled by the Penglai Supreme Sect. There's no need for outsiders like you to interfere," Daoist Cangqiu stated rudely.

Di Nufeng took a large stride forward and went straight for the verbal kill. "The fight's already over, and now you show up here flapping your mouth? Where were you earlier? Why not wait until Tomb Sweeping Day so you can also pay your respects to your dead bastard father and mother while you're at it?"

Others might not dare to interrupt the two eighth-realm Eminent Ones, but Di Nufeng would. Others might not dare to curse at Eminent Ones, but she absolutely would.

However, Daoist Cangqiu had a pretty good temperament. Instead of getting angry at Di Nufeng's colorful insults, he actually chuckled. "Rather than saying I arrived late, perhaps it's more accurate to say that all of you from the Mount Shu Sect arrived too early. I hurried over the moment I learned of the chaos here, only to find all of you already present. There must be more to this, a hidden story behind the chaos. And I intend to investigate thoroughly to find out what it is."

His words implied he suspected that it was the Mount Shu Sect that had stirred up trouble in the Fuyao Kingdom.

Chu Liang bowed politely and said, "There's no hidden story, Esteemed Senior. We were here attending to our own business and just so happened to witness the injustice.

"If there's nothing else, we will take our leave and return to our respective sects. We wouldn't want to interfere in the affairs between the Penglai Supreme Sect and the Fuyao Kingdom."

"Hold on. You may leave." Daoist Cangqiu slowly raised a hand and pointed at Jing Wuya. "But he stays."

Upon seeing Daoist Cangqiu, Jing Wuya, who was half dead, suddenly seemed to come alive with a glimmer of hope in his eyes—hope that he could survive this ordeal.

Di Nufeng turned to glare at Jing Wuya, causing him to quickly avert his gaze and adopt a weak, helpless, and pitiful expression.

Di Nufeng shifted her gaze back to Daoist Cangqiu and spoke in a scathing tone. "We risked our lives in this battle just for this small gain. You think we'll leave him behind just because you said so? What is he to you, your father?"

"This matter was never something you should have interfered in," Daoist Cangqiu replied, his voice was cold and unwavering. "I won't hold you accountable for overstepping, but my sect must investigate the root cause of this incident. Naturally, that means you cannot take away the mastermind behind this incident. If you don't leave him behind, none of you will be leaving either."

The moment Di Nufeng heard that, she rolled up her sleeves, clearly getting riled up. "Heeeeeh!"

"Esteemed Teacher, Esteemed Teacher..." Chu Liang called out, hurriedly pulling her back.

He had a pretty good idea why Daoist Cangqiu was so adamant about keeping Jing Wuya.

For years, the general of the Royal Wave Bureau, Jing Wuya, had run rampant in the Fuyao Kingdom, standing on equal footing with the king. Yet, no moves had been made to remove him from power. Since they were within the Penglai Supreme Sect's territory, there was only one possibility as to why that was. He had likely given the Penglai Supreme Sect plenty of supplies, ensuring the sect would value him highly.

From the Penglai Supreme Sect's perspective, maintaining the Fuyao Kingdom's stability was beneficial because it ensured a steady flow of resources and disciples. Nevertheless, the Penglai Supreme Sect was a massive sect, with a far more complex hierarchy of power than that of the Mount Shu Sect. It was impossible for every member of the Penglai Supreme Sect to be free of personal ambition.

For example, Daoist Cangqiu oversaw the immortal sects of the East Sea's island kingdoms. If Jing Wuya had been bribing him handsomely while acknowledging the Penglai Supreme Sect as his true master, then Daoist Cangqiu would naturally turn a blind eye to his actions.

Even if Jing Wuya had successfully seized the throne, the Penglai Supreme Sect's control over the Fuyao Kingdom would remain unchanged. Daoist Cangqiu, on the other hand, would gain quite a bit.

It was like keeping two crickets in a fighting cage. No matter which cricket won, the true winner was always the master holding the cage.

However, if Jing Wuya fell into the hands of the Mount Shu Sect, it would find out about all of that, and Daoist Cangqiu's dirty deals with Jing Wuya might get exposed.

The more Chu Liang understood this, the more determined he was to keep Jing Wuya. At this point, the conflict between the Mount Shu Sect and the Penglai Supreme Sect was already out in the open. There was no reason for the Mount Shu Sect to back down now.

To the righteous sects, someone like Jing Wuya was a highly valuable treasure trove of secrets. In some ways, he might even be more valuable than Immortal Yuan Lu.

Chu Liang straightened his back and puffed out his chest. He declared loudly, "The chaos in the Fuyao Kingdom placed the king's life in danger, and I just so happened to step in to save him. It was at the king's request for assistance that we captured this traitor today. The East Sea may be the Penglai Supreme Sect's domain, but the Fuyao Kingdom is not your personal property.

"Had I stood by and done nothing, allowing Jing Wuya to seize power, who knows how many innocent soldiers and civilians would have perished? Esteemed Senior Cangqiu, we of the Mount Shu Sect did not intervene to challenge the Penglai Supreme Sect's authority; we did it to save lives. We do not need Penglai's permission to take action; that permission was given to us by the people of the Fuyao Kingdom!"

Daoist Cangqiu watched Chu Liang intently. "Quite the silver tongue you have there."

He paused and then shouted, "Han Lingshou, get over here!"

His voice boomed like thunder, loud enough for Han Lingshou to hear. Han Lingshou had been waiting somewhere far off, not daring to get close.

When Daoist Cangqiu summoned him, Han Lingshou shook in alarm. He rushed over and answered, "Esteemed Cultivator Cangqiu!"

It was clear from his expression that his fear of the Penglai Supreme Sect ran deep.

Unfortunately, the king of the Fuyao Kingdom was not the only one suffering from this affliction. For many years, the people of the Fuyao Kingdom had lived under the Penglai Supreme Sect's

control, and a strange mental state had taken root in all of them. They simultaneously revered, feared, and yearned for the Penglai Supreme Sect.

Daoist Cangqiu didn't even spare Han Lingshou a glance. Instead, he asked slowly, "Young Hero Chu said he saved your life and that he acted at your request for assistance. Is this true?"

"This..." Han Lingshou uttered hesitantly.

He looked at Chu Liang and then at Daoist Cangqiu. His eyes showed he was struggling with his conflicting feelings.

His true feelings were, of course, that he wanted to side with the people from the Mount Shu Sect. Although they were strangers, Chu Liang had stepped in heroically to save him and had helped him root out Jing Wuya—a malignant tumor growing in his kingdom. On all accounts, Chu Liang was both his and the Fuyao Kingdom's savior.

But...

Han Lingshou's gaze shifted to the citizens of the Fuyao Kingdom gathered beyond the palace walls.

As the king of this island kingdom, he couldn't completely sever ties with the Penglai Supreme Sect. He too had once been a passionate youth, full of ideals and ambitions, so he knew where Chu Liang was coming from.

But it won't work.

This was the Fuyao Kingdom. It was too far from the Heavenly Kingdom and too close to Penglai.

But Miss Xue is on the Mount Shu Sect's side. If I lie, would she despise me?

Han Lingshou glanced at Xue Lingxue. She gazed at him with an expectant look, hoping that he would side with them.

Ah...

Han Lingshou truly admired Miss Xue from the depths of his heart, but his fear of the Penglai Supreme Sect ran so deep that it was practically ingrained in his bones. For the rulers of the Fuyao Kingdom, this fear was like a hereditary disease.

Daoist Cangqiu's intent was obvious. Knowing Han Lingshou was nothing more than Penglai's loyal dog, Daoist Cangqiu was pressuring him to persuade the Mount Shu Sect to back down.

After all, how could he possibly speak the truth?

However... Han Lingshou suddenly turned his gaze to Lin Bei.

Lin Bei was standing nearby, looking at him with an encouraging expression.

When I met Brother Lin Bei, we instantly became friends. There is no doubt we're kindred spirits. Though our time together has been brief, it's as if our souls resonated together.

If Lin Bei were in my shoes, what would he choose? Would he ever be a treacherous, cowardly man who repays kindness with betrayal just to save himself?

No! Lin Bei, my brother, I will not let you down! True brothers stand together!

...

Daoist Cangqiu had been completely confident in the outcome. To the Penglai Supreme Sect, the king of the Fuyao Kingdom was nothing more than a herding dog. For generations, none of the kingdom's rulers had ever dared to defy the Penglai Supreme Sect. So, no matter what the truth was, Daoist Cangqiu was certain Han Lingshou would say what he wanted to hear.

He watched as Han Lingshou fell into deep thought, seemingly on the verge of surrendering to his fate. Yet, at that very last moment, he turned his gaze away, leaving Daoist Cangqiu in shock. Han Lingshou's eyes were suddenly ablaze with determination like he had been injected with incredible strength.

Daoist Cangqiu followed his gaze, only to see nothing more than a bushy-browed, large-eyed disciple of the Mount Shu Sect standing there.

What's so special about him? Daoist Cangqiu wondered.

Then Han Lingshou held his head high and puffed his chest out. He declared loudly, "It is true!"

Chapter 774: These People of the Fuyao Kingdom Speak Like They're From the Shu Territory (I)

Daoist Cangqiu left in a rage.

...

Earlier...

Han Lingshou's response truly caught Daoist Cangqiu off guard.

The Penglai Supreme Sect had maintained control over the Fuyao Kingdom for centuries, abusing it like a tyrant. The Fuyao Kingdom had never dared to resist. For the people of the Fuyao Kingdom, being submissive to the Penglai Supreme Sect had already become second nature.

So, when Daoist Cangsheng called Han Lingshou forward, he had not even considered the possibility that Han Lingshou would receive an answer he didn't like.

The divine light in Daoist Cangsheng's eyes made him look especially imposing as he cast a furious glare at Han Lingshou. Nevertheless, Han Lingshou held his ground, meeting Daoist Cangsheng's gaze with unwavering determination.

Even a cornered rabbit would bite back, let alone the ruler of a kingdom. It wasn't just his bonds with Chu Liang, Lin Bei, and Xue Lingxue that gave Han Lingshou the courage to defy Daoist Cangqiu. It was also the flames of anger burning in his heart.

For generations, the Han Clan of the Fuyao Kingdom had remained loyal and subservient to the Penglai Supreme Sect. Yet, Daoist Cangqiu had turned a blind eye to Jing Wuya's treasonous actions and even protected him. If Chu Liang had not intervened and stopped Jing Wuya, the Fuyao Kingdom would have already fallen into his treacherous hands.

Even then, nothing would change for the Penglai Supreme Sect. It would remain in control and continue looking down on the Fuyao Kingdom. The Penglai Supreme Sect certainly would not bother doling out justice for Han Lingshou, who would have just been another dead king in a long line of dead kings.

I treat you like my father, but you treat me like some unimportant nephew!

Recalling the suffering he had to endure under the Penglai Supreme Sect's thumb, Han Lingshou hardened his resolve and delivered a small but firm rebuke to Daoist Cangqiu.

"Very well," Daoist Cangqiu uttered. He was now so enraged that he laughed. Flinging out his sleeves, he said, "It seems I was meddling where I wasn't needed. Since that's the case, I shall take my leave."

With a sweep of his sleeve, he soared upward. A seven-colored cloud gathered beneath his feet, and he disappeared into the sky in the blink of an eye.

Once Daoist Cangsheng was gone, Lin Bei jumped over and excitedly embraced Han Lingshou. "Brother Han! I knew you could do it! As expected of someone I've acknowledged as a real man!"

"Brother Lin!" Han Lingshou clapped Lin Bei heavily on the shoulder. "It was thanks to all of you that I found the strength to stand my ground! This time, the Fuyao Kingdom owes you a great debt of gratitude!"

"We're all brothers!" Lin Bei exclaimed boisterously. "There's no need for you to say all that!"

Han Lingshou's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "That's right. Saying 'thank you' would only create distance between us. This... is our bond!"

The two of them were so fired up that it was as if they had just fought an intense and bloody battle. Anyone watching might even think they were the ones who had defeated Jing Wuya and Liao Yuexian.

Meanwhile, the ones who had actually fought in the battle—Daoist Yan, Di Nufeng, and Chu Liang—were quite calm.

Chu Liang turned to Daoist Yan and said, "Senior Aunt Yan, take Jing Wuya back first. We don't want any more unexpected incidents. We'll handle the cleanup here."

Daoist Yan nodded in agreement. "All right."

Di Nufeng stepped forward and affectionately clung to Daoist Yan. "Hehe, if Yan Zi is leaving, then I'm going too."

Daoist Yan summoned the Heavenly Cloud Ancient Sword, and it floated in midair, emitting a white glow. She stepped onto the sword, waiting for Di Nufeng to leave with her.

However, a blurry mass of golden light appeared in the west, accompanied by a clear, resounding cry.

"Oh?" Di Nufeng's eyes gleamed with excitement. "Yan Zi, you go on ahead. I just remembered I have something to take care of."

Daoist Yan didn't think much of it. She just replied indifferently, "Okay."

Then she rode her sword skyward.

Whoosh!

A streak of white flashed through the sky, vanishing in the blink of an eye.

Meanwhile, the blurry golden radiance in the west gradually grew closer. Everyone on the ground could see it clearly now. It was a majestic, golden divine phoenix with its wings spread wide. The divine phoenix looked incomparably noble and beautiful. As its feathers fluttered in the wind, each one shimmered with spiritual qi.

This was a seventh-realm spirit beast—a Golden Phoenix. It was a proud creature whose bloodline could be traced back to ancient times, yet it was serving as a mere mount.

There was a woman seated on its back. Even though her figure was still a blur to the people on the ground, they could tell she was as beautiful as a celestial being. She had an ethereal presence—like a celestial beauty standing alone high in the clouds, separated from the mortal world.

She was like a goddess descending to the mortal world.

...

Just as the Golden Phoenix was about to land, Di Nufeng called out affectionately, "Yanyaaaaan!"

She leaped onto the Golden Phoenix, causing the Golden Phoenix to flinch in shock.

It was obvious Di Nufeng had deliberately stayed because she had sensed the Golden Phoenix's presence from afar through their shared bloodline connection.

The woman on the Golden Phoenix's back wore a flowing dress, colored a deep purple-red, and had a sheer muslin scarf draped over her shoulders. As she swayed in with the Golden Phoenix, her scarf and the long, wide sleeves of her dress fluttered gently in the breeze.

The woman's hair was fashioned in an elegant bun—the style of celestials. Her brows and eyes were as radiant as morning clouds, and her skin was as flawless as the finest porcelain.

When she arrived, silence fell over the palace.

Earlier, Daoist Cangqiu had soared through the sky in a cloud of qi and arrived looking rather imposing. It was quite the grand entrance. His immortal-like demeanor and mastery of the Heavenly Origin were certainly impressive, but his appearance was a fatal flaw. No matter how otherworldly he acted, he just didn't look like a celestial being that had descended from the heavens.

However, that wasn't the case with this woman. All she did was shift her gaze, but she had such an ethereal quality that it looked as if she were a true celestial being.

No one could tell her age, but they all had the same thought. Even if the passage of time reduces her to mere bones, she would still be the most beautiful woman in the world.

Purely in terms of looks, beauties like Jiang Yuebai and Shen Qingyan were no less stunning than this woman. However, they lacked the celestial elegance and ethereal quality that had been a result of her cultivation.

The woman carried an aura of saintly purity that made people hesitant to approach her. Even just looking at her for a long time would give them an inexplicable sense of guilt like they had committed a shameful act of blasphemy.

And yet, before the woman had even landed and steadied herself, Di Nufeng had already pounced on her. Di Nufeng wrapped her arms tightly around the woman's waist and vigorously rubbed her face against the woman's shoulder.

"Yanyan! I missed you so damn much! You never come over to Mount Shu to see us! I've missed the sound of your guqin a lot! My longing for you is like what that poem said, mm... It's simply because you're too beautiful..."

"..."

The group of people on the ground stared in shock as Di Nufeng violated the goddess-like woman.

"That's your conservatory master, right?" Chu Liang whispered.

He figured out the woman's identity pretty easily. Even without her famous Golden Phoenix mount, the woman's otherworldly beauty was enough to confirm her identity.

Who else could it be except Yan Yingluo, the legendary beauty who had captivated the nine provinces in her youth?

"That's right," Xue Lingxue answered with a nod, looking quite surprised at the scene of Di Nufeng with her teacher.

She had grown up by her teacher's side, but she had never seen her teacher allow anyone to get this physically close to her. Yet, Di Nufeng had managed to pounce on Yan Yingluo before she could even straighten out her clothes.

Yan Yingluo barely managed to push Di Nufeng away, her lips curving into a helpless smile. "Ah Feng... Can you not be like this? I'm here on official business."

Di Nufeng patted her chest proudly. "We've already taken care of everything! Liao Yuexian has already been chased away! As for Jing Wuya, the Celestial Charm Sect member she was colluding with—well, there's only half of him left now. Yan Zi has already taken him back to Mount Shu for interrogation. If there's any more news related to the South Melody Conservatory, I'll be the first to tell you!"

Her eyes blazed with excitement as if eagerly awaiting a reward.

"It's all over?" Yan Yingluo's gaze swept over the battlefield. "I guess I arrived a step too late."

"You're not late at all!" Di Nufeng grinned, chuckling mischievously. "Even if you missed the fight, we can still get cozy and catch up, can't we?"

She let out a hearty laugh and pounced toward Yan Yingluo again.

Whoosh!

In a blink, Yan Yingluo turned into a blur. When she reappeared, she was standing gracefully before Xue Lingxue, her robes fluttering elegantly in the wind.

Xue Lingxue immediately bowed in greeting. "Esteemed Teacher."

"I received all the messages you sent," Yan Yingluo said. "I never expected the imposter to be Liao Yuexian. But now that her identity and involvement with the Celestial Charm Sect have been exposed, I doubt she'll dare to act so recklessly again. You may return to the conservatory and resume your closed-door cultivation in peace."

Xue Lingxue replied, "Understood."

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Yan Yingluo then shifted her gaze to Chu Liang. "It's truly all thanks to you for assisting, Young Hero Chu. If not for your efforts, this matter wouldn't have been resolved so smoothly."

Chu Liang quickly replied, "Not at all, Esteemed Senior. Miss Xue once saved my life, so I merely did what I could to help her with a small favor."

Yan Yingluo smiled. "This was far from a small favor."

She turned her hand over and revealed a strange object that was shaped like a beast egg and resembled a ceramic instrument. Its surface was adorned with intricate ancient carvings of flower patterns, and it had several holes, making it look like some kind of wind instrument.

"This is the South Melody Conservatory's Wisdom Wind Xun[1]," Yan Yingluo explained as she held the object out to Chu Liang. "With this, you will always be the South Melody Conservatory's guest of honor, no matter where you go. If you ever need assistance, simply play the xun. Its melody can be heard up to five hundred li away. Any disciple of the conservatory who hears it will come to your aid."

"This..." Chu Liang uttered hesitantly, feeling stunned.

This treasure is essentially the South Melody Conservatory's official friendship badge!

He ultimately replied, "Conservatory Master, this is far too precious. I don't deserve such an honor..."

"Haa." Di Nufeng rushed over and shoved the Wisdom Wind Xun into his hands. She said boisterously, "Yanyan and I are close, so there's no need to be so polite! Just take it. We're practically family anyway."

Haha, Chu Liang chuckled inwardly. Esteemed Teacher, I can tell that you feel quite close to her, but... she doesn't seem to feel the same way about you.

Nevertheless, Chu Liang hadn't meant what he said; he truly was just being polite. Now that Di Nufeng had shoved the Wisdom Wind Xun into his hands, he naturally accepted it without hesitation.

"If the South Melody Conservatory ever has a need for me in the future, don't hesitate to ask. I will do my best to assist you."

Yan Yingluo noticed that the people gathering around them were quickly increasing in number. Some of the older folks had recognized her.

After all, the Fuyao Kingdom held the South Melody Conservatory in extremely high regard. Some of its citizens had gone to the nine provinces and seen her in her youth.

Now, some people in the crowd were even kneeling down to worship her.

Yan Yingluo turned back to Chu Liang and the others. "If there's nothing else, let's go. The Fuyao Kingdom's affairs are no longer our concern."

Before Xue Lingxue could even respond to her teacher, Di Nufeng climbed onto the Golden Phoenix and sat cross-legged as she waited for Yan Yingluo to join her.

She exclaimed, "That's true! Disciples, you head back first. I'll stay behind and catch up with Yanyan."

Chu Liang couldn't help but laugh. "All right. You don't need to worry about us, Esteemed Teacher."

Even the most noble woman would be afraid of being bothered by a certain phoenix. Looks like Conservatory Master Yan is in for quite the headache today.

...

Now that the issues involving the Fuyao Kingdom were settled, Chu Liang and Lin Bei boarded the Lianglong and returned to Mount Shu.

By the time they arrived, a curtain of darkness had been drawn over the sky. It was nightfall, and just as Chu Liang had expected, his teacher had yet to return. So, Chu Liang made a trip to Heaven-Reaching Peak to check on Jing Wuya's interrogation.

Wang Xuanling was just stepping out of the Boundless Palace. Seeing Chu Liang, Wang Xuanling told him about how the interrogation had gone.

"He confessed to everything. At first, he tried to put up a strong front and stayed quiet. But after the Discipline Master used a few of her methods on him, he ended up recounting his entire life story—all one hundred-odd years of it."

Chu Liang laughed.

As the only person in the Mount Shu Sect—and perhaps the entire world—who could make Di Nufeng yield obediently, the Discipline Master was certainly extraordinary. Though the elderly woman had mellowed somewhat in temperament over the years, her ruthlessness had not diminished in the slightest. When it came time to act, she showed no hesitation or mercy.

Now, as an undisputed member of the Mount Shu Sect's upper ranks, Chu Liang had no trouble getting access to read Jing Wuya's confession. All he needed to do was go inside the Boundless Palace and ask, and he obtained the written confession.

It turned out that Jing Wuya had been born into a small, insignificant sect in the Fuyao Kingdom. His father had been the sect leader. However, because Jing Wuya was short and unattractive, he faced constant discrimination in the Fuyao Kingdom, which placed great value on appearance.

The discrimination was so bad that even his own father refused to pass the position of sect leader to him. Instead, his father found a way to adopt one of his disciples to become his son and prepared to hand the position to him instead.

Jing Wuya never protested. He simply worked on his cultivation quietly, working hard to hone his skills with relentless dedication. He had exceptional talent for cultivation, and after training for some time in a secluded corner, he became the most powerful cultivator in his sect.

Then, one rainy night, he severed the legs of everyone in his sect—including his father's.

It was no surprise at all that Jing Wuya, a talented and ruthless person with immense hatred for the world, was later recruited by the Celestial Charm Sect.

At that point, which was around eighty years ago, the Celestial Charm Sect had just failed to complete one of its plots to sow chaos in the Yu Dynasty's imperial palace. In the wake of that failure, the imperial court and the immortal sects launched a massive purge of the Celestial Charm Sect members from the nine provinces. All Celestial Charm Sect members were slaughtered on sight, creating bloodbaths everywhere.

The Celestial Master temporarily fled to the Fuyao Kingdom to lay low, and while he was there, he decided to plant a pawn—Jing Wuya. Even the Celestial Master likely hadn't expected that this randomly planted pawn would rise to power decades later, eventually becoming the General of the Royal Wave Bureau.

It was only afterward that the Celestial Master gave Jing Wuya more resources and even sent Liao Yuexian to work alongside him.

However, it seemed that the Celestial Charm Sect was unaware of Liao Yuexian's relation to the Dark King Sect. The upper ranks of the Mount Shu Sect strongly suspected that the Dark King Sect might have orchestrated her collusion with the Celestial Charm Sect. It was very possible that she was a spy that the Dark King Sect had planted within the Celestial Charm Sect to gather intelligence on their activities.

As for the Aoshan Divine Armor and Mirror of Captured Light, the Celestial Master was the one who had given them to Jing Wuya.

Nevertheless, both Jing Wuya and Liao Yuexian were merely peripheral figures within the Celestial Charm Sect. Located across the sea, they were isolated and not closely connected to the sect's main forces.

It was the first time the Mount Shu Sect had captured a member of the evil Celestial Charm Sect alive, yet they were unable to extract any crucial information about the sect's deeper workings. It was truly regrettable. Of course, there had been previous opportunities to capture Celestial Charm Sect members alive, but a certain peak master of Silver Sword Peak had been too heavy-handed and ended up killing them all instead...

"Hmm?"

As Chu Liang reviewed the confession, he noticed something unexpected.

It turned out that in order to prevent the Penglai Supreme Sect from interfering, Jing Wuya had bribed Daoist Cangqiu and other high-ranking members of the Penglai Supreme Sect. He had even committed numerous acts of treachery that humiliated and weakened the Fuyao Kingdom.

For example, there were several small islands in the East Sea that were rich in Mountain-Suppressing Rock, a valuable resource. These islands had historically belonged to the Fuyao Kingdom.

However, when the Heavenly Star Divine Cult split, Starhold Island pledged allegiance to the Penglai Supreme Sect. In response, the Penglai Supreme Sect casually redrew the map and granted Starhold Island control over vast maritime territories, including those rich in Mountain-Suppressing Rock deposits. This included the tail end of the mineral veins, which extended into the small island where the Fuyao Kingdom was located.

The Fuyao Kingdom had been outraged, but it was too powerless to resist. The Penglai Supreme Sect saw Starhold Island as a favored son with strategic value, whereas the Fuyao Kingdom was no more than a pet dog. Naturally, the Fuyao Kingdom's protests meant nothing.

Despite that, the Fuyao Kingdom never officially relinquished its claim on those islands and continued to assert that they belonged to it. However, Starhold Island was the one actually operating the mines; the Fuyao Kingdom did not have any control over them.

Over the years, the Fuyao Kingdom and Starhold Island had gotten into numerous conflicts, and the Fuyao Kingdom would always lose.

After Jing Wuya gained power in the Fuyao Kingdom, he sought to build a good relationship with Starhold Island. It was all in the hope of raising his standing in the eyes of their dear father, the Penglai Supreme Sect.

So, with a wave of his hand, he relinquished the Fuyao Kingdom's claim over the disputed islands, even renouncing the kingdom's nominal sovereignty over them.

He sacrificed the kingdom's interests to secure his own position.

Among all the heinous acts that Jing Wuya had committed, this particular one was relatively minor, yet it had caught Chu Liang's attention.

A warm, innocent smile appeared on his face.

...

Starhold Island.

On this particular day, Hong Jufeng, a young man with a massive build, had just woken up.

Before he even got to wash his face, someone banged on his door urgently.

His subordinates called out frantically from the door. "Young Master! Bad news! Young Master!"

Annoyed, Hong Jufeng replied, "Come in. What's got you wailing like a funeral procession?"

Several Starhold Island disciples staggered into the room, covered in blood from head to toe. They cried out, "Bad news, Young Master! Some people have seized the northern islands from us—the ones with the mineral deposits!"

Hong Jufeng shot up from his bed. "What?! Who in the entire East Sea would dare steal from Starhold Island? Do they have a death wish?!"

His subordinates answered anxiously, "It's... a group of people from the Fuyao Kingdom that speak in the dialect of people from the Shu Territory!"

Chapter 776: Monastery Guardian

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom...

A massive Mountain-Drilling Beast had already tunneled halfway into the mountain. It had a sharp, single horn on its head and two powerful claws built for digging. This creature was born to burrow through the earth.

It could move effortlessly through underground tunnels, often hollowing out mountains and causing landslides and earthquakes. Because of this, it was once considered a dangerous beast that had to be killed on sight. But over time, human cultivators captured them and learned to tame them. These creatures were far better at mining tough minerals than even enchanted tools, making them incredibly valuable.

Before long, the Mountain-Drilling Beast had burrowed deep into the mountainside. The sound of its tunneling grew fainter until only a muffled echo remained. Its long tail, the only part still visible, swayed through the gravel with a soft rustling.

Standing at a distance with his hands on his hips, Lin Bei estimated aloud, "The Mountain-Suppressing Rock deposit is incredibly tough. Even with a Mountain-Drilling Beast, mining it won't be quick. We're looking at about a year before we get enough."

Chu Liang, standing behind him, smiled as he gazed into the distance. "That's plenty of time. Once we start extracting the Mountain-Suppressing Rock, the Hall of Construction can begin immediately. By the time we complete our pending orders and earn a hefty sum, Red Cotton Peak will no longer have any financial stress."

Chu Liang and Lin Bei weren't just anywhere. They were at the archipelago that the Fuyao Kingdom and the Starhold Island were currently fighting over.

The islands weren't very big. To both the Fuyao Kingdom and Starhold Island, they would have been worthless if not for the Mountain-Suppressing Rocks found there. That was what started the whole series of disputes.

When Starhold Island forcefully took over the archipelago, the Fuyao Kingdom couldn't do much about it. But when Chu Liang found out about it yesterday, he immediately sent Lin Bei overnight to meet his sworn brother, Han Lingshou.

The two sides made a deal. The Mount Shu Sect would help the Fuyao Kingdom reclaim the quarrying islands, and in return, they would gain the rights to mine there.

Of course, all the extracted Mountain-Suppressing Rock would be sold at a price above the market rate. In other words, the Fuyao Kingdom wouldn't have to lift a finger, yet they'd rake in a massive fortune in spirit stones and spirit-stone coins.

Naturally, Han Lingshou had no reason to refuse such an offer.

If there was any downside, it was the risk of offending Starhold Island. But Starhold Island had occupied Fuyao Kingdom's lands for centuries without worrying about offending the Fuyao Kingdom. So why should the Fuyao Kingdom take care of Starhold Island?

Lin Bei and Han Lingshou sealed the deal, signed the contract, and paid a deposit. The next day, they quickly assembled a group of Mount Shu Sect disciples under the Royal Wave Bureau's banner and set off for the islands to "reclaim" lost territories.

"I'm just worried Starhold Island might come back to cause trouble," Lin Bei said. "They have the Penglai Supreme Sect backing them, so mining peacefully in the East Sea won't be easy."

"Unless they dare to go against the will of the world," Chu Liang replied. "It is completely justified for the Royal Wave Bureau to reclaim land for the Fuyao Kingdom. The Penglai Supreme Sect can't interfere so easily. If anything's going to be a problem, it'll be Daoist Cangqiu. We should remind Han Lingshou to stay alert. He offended Daoist Cangqiu last time, and who knows if Cangqiu will resort to some underhanded tricks."

"I've already warned him. His defenses are now ten times more thorough than before, so there shouldn't be any problems," Lin Bei said.

As he spoke, he suddenly gasped and blurted out, "Eh?"

From his line of sight, he spotted a small boat slowly approaching the island from afar.

A lone boat on the vast sea wasn't unusual. But what caught his attention were the two figures on that boat, one elderly and the other one with tanned skin.

The old man had a kind and benevolent air. Dressed in a simple long robe, he stood quietly at the bow with great calm and a composed gaze.

The figure with tanned skin was a tall and slender young man with arms extending past his knees. He was clearly an extraordinary individual with an unusual appearance.

Coincidentally, both of them were familiar faces.

Lin Bei broke into a grin and called out, "Oldie Brodie?"

Chu Liang, eyeing the younger figure, raised a brow in surprise. "Brother Du?"

...

Compared to the rising turmoil in the East Sea, calmness seemed to have returned to the South Sea. After the Sea Master and the ambitious schemers in the Ruins of Return who followed him were eliminated, peace once again settled among the sea demons.

Nevertheless, Grand Ancestor Wuchao remained a looming shadow over everything and controlling everything.

On this day, an unexpected visitor arrived at the Ruins of Return.

Deep within the dark, unfathomable waters, a faint azure glow emerged. It flickered eerily as it drifted toward the heart of the region. The moment that azure light descended, the surrounding inky waters suddenly parted.

The aging and weary figure of Grand Ancestor Wuchao, the true master of the South Sea, appeared. As he gazed at the approaching figure, a rare trace of fear flickered in his murky eyes.

The azure glow faded, and a thin and frail figure emerged.

A middle-aged man stood clad in an azure and black Daoist robe. His pale, beardless face exuded the refined air of a scholar. Though his expression was unreadable, his sharp, icy gaze seemed to pierce through everything.

Grand Ancestor Wuchao felt a familiar aura radiating from the man. A trace of disbelief flashed across his face.

"Sir, are you..." He hesitated. "Are you from there?"

The middle-aged Daoist monk nodded. "Yes. The Divine Ruins Monastery."

"Greetings to the Monastery Guardian!"

Grand Ancestor Wuchao began to bow, but the man raised a hand, signaling him to stop. At once, Grand Ancestor Wuchao froze, keeping his gaze fixed on the Daoist monk.

Grand Ancestor Wuchao was the oldest sea demon in the South Sea and one of the few beings in the world that were on the verge of ascension, yet there was a trace of humility in his stance.

"No need for such formalities," the middle-aged man said flatly. "I heard you've been to our monastery before, so you should know that if I'm here to see you, it's not for a good reason."

Grand Ancestor Wuchao nodded. "Back then, I was fortunate enough to reach the foot of the mountain where the Divine Ruins Monastery stands, but I was not fated to ascend. Monastery Guardian, you've come because of the recent attempt to revive the Hallowed Mother, haven't you?"

"That's right," the middle-aged man replied. "You should know that reviving a dead ninth-realm existence is strictly forbidden. It is our duty to eliminate anyone who attempts such a thing."

Grand Ancestor Wuchao quickly responded, "It was nothing more than the actions of a few disobedient and reckless young sea demons. I have already killed them. I can assure you that none of the remaining sea demons would dare have such thoughts again."

The middle-aged man kept his hands tucked in his sleeves and spoke with an indifferent tone and expression, "Even if this was orchestrated solely by the Sea Master, you are still the one who rules over the Ruins of Return from behind the scenes. You can't tell me that you had no idea of it happening."

With the way he spoke, he didn't seem like a human.

Grand Ancestor Wuchao argued, "I had long issued an order forbidding it—"

"You only acted after the matter was exposed," the middle-aged man stated flatly. "Perhaps it was only when you realized the secret had leaked that you finally spoke out against it."

"That is absolutely not the case!" Grand Ancestor Wuchao raised his voice.

"But the possibility exists," the middle-aged man responded ruthlessly. "While you may not have been the one behind this, you are guilty of allowing it to happen. By order of the Monastery Overseer, I have the authority to pass judgment. As of this moment, I sentence you to a loss of a thousand years' worth of cultivation power. Do you have any objections?"

"I..." Grand Ancestor Wuchao hesitated, as if he wanted to argue. But when his gaze met the middle-aged man's cold, unyielding eyes, he eventually let out a long sigh and said, "I do not dare."

"Mm."

The middle-aged man said no more. He withdrew his hand from his sleeve and shaped his fingers into a saber.

Swish!

With a single slash through the void, a surge of qi tore through the darkness behind Grand Ancestor Wuchao. A sharp tearing sound echoed, and Grand Ancestor Wuchao furrowed his brows.

A moment later, murky blood seeped into the inky water, and a colossal, mottled tentacle—stretching as long as a mountain range—slowly emerged.

It turned out that the immense darkness behind Grand Ancestor Wuchao was what concealed his true form. Yet, with just a casual strike, the middle-aged man had severed one of Grand Ancestor Wuchao's tentacles, containing a thousand years of his cultivation power.

As his cultivation power drained away, Grand Ancestor Wuchao's face turned pale; he looked significantly weaker. He asked, "Monastery Guardian, surely the Ruins of Return is not the only place you've come to punish? As far as I know, we are not the only ones involved in this matter."

"By the rules of the monastery, I am forbidden to speak on the matter," the middle-aged man replied coldly before turning to leave.

Grand Ancestor Wuchao did not press further. Instead, he asked, "If that is the case, then according to the rules of the Divine Ruins Monastery, I am at least entitled to know the name of the Monastery Guardian who has passed judgment on me, correct?"

"You may," the middle-aged man replied. He cast a final glance at him and uttered one sentence, "My name is Lu Cang."

Chapter 777: Sworn Father?

The Mirage Mountain, Penglai.

While Grand Ancestor Wuchao of the South Sea was struck and lost a thousand years of cultivation power, another similarly dressed middle-aged man arrived at Penglai in the East Sea.

This middle-aged man wore an ancient yet simple azure and black Daoist robe. He appeared far more handsome and upright than the other, yet his expression remained just as unreadable as the other one. However, his demeanor was aloof and carried a sense of weariness and past hardships.

He stood inside Daoist Cangsheng's cave dwelling and faced the sect leader of the Penglai Supreme Sect with a piercing gaze, similar to that of the other mysterious middle-aged man.

Looking at the unexpected guest, hesitation flickered in Daoist Cangsheng's eyes. "Yang Buwei? You've changed. A lot, actually."

The middle-aged Daoist, referred to as Yang Buwei, responded in an indifferent tone, "If you spent a hundred years in that wretched place, you'd change a lot too."

"You're here because the plan failed, aren't you?" Daoist Cangsheng asked.

Yang Buwei's tone remained devoid of emotion. "If you had succeeded, I wouldn't be here. You should have been the one to seek me out."

Daoist Cangsheng shook his head. "I failed to uphold our agreement. I'm beginning to suspect this was the Divine Ruins Monastery's scheme all along. They obviously knew what we really wanted to do with that primordial spiritual embryo, yet they gave it to me anyway. They must have known it was a devil of an embryo—one that could never be nurtured and sustained. There was never a chance of success, and they knew it."

"Divine Ruins Monastery..." Yang Buwei muttered, lowering his head to glance at his palm.

After a brief pause, he continued, "I am part of the Divine Ruins Monastery."

A golden divine sigil, looking intricate and complex, glowed faintly on his right palm. It was like a branded mark, but pulsing with an eerie glow.

"You are a member of the Penglai Supreme Sect," Daoist Cangsheng said, deliberately enunciating the word "Penglai." Then, as if reminding him, he added, "You must not forget why we started all of this."

Yang Buwei appeared completely indifferent to Daoist Cangsheng's words. "All that needed to be forgotten has already been forgotten."

Daoist Cangsheng's voice deepened as he asked, "What exactly did you experience in there?"

Yang Buwei's response was cold and unwavering. "It cannot be spoken."

There was a brief moment of silence.

Daoist Cangsheng stared into Yang Buwei's eyes, but all he saw was a piercing coldness—one that seemed capable of seeing through the entire world.

After a moment, he spoke slowly, "Have you come here to deal with me?"

Yang Buwei met his gaze without wavering. "I need to take an arm of yours to report back to them."

"Alright," Daoist Cangsheng said, agreeing without the slightest hesitation.

He understood that this wasn't just the simple loss of a limb, where he could regenerate the limb after. If he lost this arm, it would never grow back. Worse still, a significant portion of his cultivation power would be severed along with it.

However, this was the price he had to pay—not for violating the rules but for failing.

Yang Buwei lifted his right hand, and the divine sigil on his palm lit up. The intricate lines around it shimmered with an eerie glow.

Swish!

In an instant, Daoist Cangsheng's left arm was severed at the shoulder and fell to the ground.

Yang Buwei curled his finger, and the detached limb flew into his grasp. He then said, "Don't ever try again. It was never possible to begin with. Only after entering the monastery did I realize how naive we once were."

With the loss of his cultivation power, Daoist Cangsheng turned deathly pale, drained of all color. Even so, his expression remained calm.

He then asked, "There was never any hope for us... but when you were in the Divine Ruins Monastery, did you see where Penglai's hope lies?"

"It cannot be spoken," Yang Buwei answered decisively.

He turned away, about to leave just like that. Though he was born as a member of the Penglai Supreme Sect and an old acquaintance of Daoist Cangsheng, he had come here in a hurry just to slice his arm off.

Daoist Cangsheng seemed unwilling to let it end there. Just as Yang Buwei was about to step out of the cave dwelling, he suddenly asked, "Then is there anything you can say?"

Yang Buwei halted. After a brief silence, he finally spoke. "I remember a disciple from Mount Shu... You wanted to kill him last time, didn't you?"

Yang Buwei's words carried a slight pause, but Daoist Cangsheng immediately grasped the underlying message.

Though he didn't know why Yang Buwei had mentioned it, he answered without hesitation, "Yes, his name is Chu Liang."

...

Upon spotting the people on the island, Du Wuhen was momentarily stunned. B

He uttered, "Chu Liang?"

"Brother Du! You're alive and well."

Chu Liang and Lin Bei stepped forward to greet them, while Grand Ancestor Fuyou and Du Wuhen effortlessly floated ashore.

Back in the Sea of Demons, Chu Liang had watched as Du Wuhen charged toward the exit, only to be struck down by Yang Bujue of the Celestial Charm Sect. By the time the fight ended, Du Wuhen had already vanished.

Considering how badly injured he had been, it had seemed likely that he had died and his corpse had been devoured by some sea demon. Because of this, neither Chu Liang nor his esteemed teacher had made an effort to search for him.

Yet, Du Wuhen was now standing before Chu Liang, appearing completely unharmed.

And the even more surprising thing was that he was following behind Grand Ancestor Fuyou.

Lin Bei greeted Grand Ancestor Fuyou with familiarity, his voice ringing with laughter. "Heheheh Oldie Brodie! Never thought we'd run into you again!"

Grand Ancestor Fuyou turned to them and said, "It does seem like fate. My brother and I have been traveling east along the coast, searching for a secluded paradise to settle down and cultivate. Sensing the abundant spiritual qi on this island, we came to take a closer look—only to unexpectedly run into you two."

Chu Liang's and Lin Bei's eyes widened in shock. "Brother?"

By any reasonable estimation, this old man had gained divine intelligence back in the era of the South Sea's Hallowed Mother. He was extremely old!

Lin Bei gasped and exclaimed, "Good heavens! I originally thought Brother Du just looked old, but now you're telling me he's old enough to be Oldie Brodie's younger brother?"

Grand Ancestor Fuyou quickly waved his hand and explained, "No, no, no. Brother Du is my elder brother."

Chu Liang and Lin Bei, utterly shocked, couldn't hold it in any longer. "Pffffffffffffffffft."

Du Wuhen hastily explained, "Well, here's what happened... I had fallen into utter despair and was about to take my own life when I happened to cross paths with Esteemed Senior Fuyou. He saved me and talked me out of it. At the time, I knew nothing of his background, only that I owed him my life. Out of gratitude, I wanted to take him as my sworn father. But who would've thought that Esteemed Senior Fuyou was such a humble person? He insisted that we become sworn brothers instead... and even insisted on being the younger one."

Grand Ancestor Fuyou said at a leisurely pace, "This old man has neither virtue nor talent. How could I dare assume the status of a father or an elder brother? From now on, Elder Brother, just call me Little Second Brother."

Du Wuhen's face was filled with helplessness. This unexpected turn of events was almost too much to process. The dramatic highs and lows of his life were an overwhelming and thrilling experience.

He had just lost the bird that had never left his side, only to gain a powerful younger brother in return.

He thought, As the saying goes, "Only when the old departs can the new arrive."

As Chu Liang watched this, he couldn't help but remark inwardly, This guy really has a knack for clinging onto powerful figures. Before, he had Wei Tiandi and Deng Yixiao following him. Then he joined Penglai. And now, he was riding along with Grand Ancestor Fuyou.

At the same time, Chu Liang's mind spun rapidly before he suddenly suggested, "Since you two are looking for a place to settle, why not stay here on the quarrying archipelago?"

Grand Ancestor Fuyou shook his head and said, "That wouldn't be appropriate. To be honest with you both, my kind's cultivation method requires us to absorb a vast amount of spiritual qi. Typically, after cultivating in one place for several years, it takes at least a century for the spiritual veins to recover. That's why we usually choose an unclaimed and remote cave dwelling to avoid disrupting others' cultivation."

If Grand Ancestor Fuyou hadn't devoured so much spiritual qi while cultivating in the South Sea, he wouldn't have been scolded and hunted down, eventually ending up as the sworn enemy of the sea demons. Judging by his words now, it seemed he had learned his lesson and was trying to turn over a new leaf.

Hearing this, Chu Liang responded with fervent enthusiasm, "It's not a problem at all. Even if you only stay for a few years, that's great! We're not cultivating here anyway. This is just one of the islands we use for quarrying. We can't be here to guard it all the time, but if you're willing to watch over the islands for us, that would certainly put my mind at ease."

"Exactly, Oldie Brodie, no need to be so polite with us," Lin Bei added, patting Grand Ancestor Fuyou on the shoulder. "We're all brothers here. Honestly, even if we gave you these islands outright, it wouldn't be a big deal. Just cultivate here with a peace of mind, and if you need any treasures of nature, ask away."

"Ah..." Grand Ancestor Fuyou's hands trembled with emotion, and he stammered, "T-this... how could I possibly accept such kindness without repaying you? In that case, why don't I take you both as my sworn fathers?"

Seeing him overwhelmed with gratitude and about to kneel, Chu Liang, Lin Bei, and Du Wuhen hurriedly stopped him in unison. "Absolutely not!"

Chu Liang and Lin Bei were especially flustered.

Who the heck would take in a son this old? If they ever brought Grand Ancestor Fuyou along to honor their ancestors, even their great-great-great-grandfather in the afterlife would have to call him "elder brother."

Du Wuhen, on the other hand, looked utterly horrified.

Great. You just swore brotherhood with me, and now you're immediately calling someone else father? And two fathers at that?

Besides, what kind of nonsense is this? Who in their right mind recognizes two people as fathers at the same time? That's not how it works! The usual tradition is that you kill one father before recognizing another...

Chu Liang quickly helped Grand Ancestor Fuyou up and said, "Esteemed Senior, there's no need to talk about repaying us. Last time, you helped us fight off those evil spirits and demons and that favor was already more than enough. Letting you cultivate here and use the spiritual veins here is hardly worth mentioning in comparison. But if you still feel uneasy about it, why don't we just treat it like we've made a deal?"

Grand Ancestor Fuyou and Du Wuhen both looked at him in surprise. "A deal?"

Chu Liang smiled. "You can stay here and cultivate in peace. Just consider it as guarding the islands for me. If anyone comes to seize the quarry, just help me drive them away."

Chapter 778: Assassination (I)

The Mountain-Drilling Beast worked tirelessly on the small quarrying island, excavating Mountain-Suppressing Rocks and transporting them back to Red Cotton Peak.

Meanwhile, over at Starhold Island, Hong Zhenyuan and his son, Hong Jufeng, were seething with rage. They had already gathered their forces and were preparing to head over to the quarrying archipelago.

Over the years, under the protection of the Penglai Supreme Sect, their sect had flourished. Their influence had grown, their forces had strengthened, and they could now rally a powerful group of cultivators at a moment's notice.

Clad in full armor, Hong Jufeng stepped forward with a fierce expression. "Father! Let me go! Haven't I always been in charge of the quarrying archipelago?"

Hong Zhenyuan replied solemnly, "You can handle the mining operations, but for something like this, I, as your father, must take the lead."

The father and son stood like two towering mountains of flesh, one larger than the other. They were both wearing divine armor, looking resplendent. Behind them, over a hundred cultivators at the fifth and sixth realms and three seventh-realm elders of Starhold Island hovered in midair.

Hong Jufeng said with a hint of concern, "Father, with you leading the charge, I'm sure dealing with those scoundrels from the Fuyao Kingdom will be no trouble at all. But I fear they might call for reinforcements, and those could be from Red Cotton Peak."

He then added in a cautious tone, "If any member of the Mount Shu Sect is there, you must be careful not to let them take advantage of you."

He had been beaten up by Di Nufeng last time, and even now, his injuries still ached on rainy days. As a result, he remained deeply wary of Mount Shu Sect.

"Don't worry," Hong Zhenyuan said with a confident smile. "If those people from Mount Shu want to play their little tricks in the East Sea, so be it. But if I rally my forces and openly declare war on the islands, and they actually dare to accept the challenge, then they would be laying hands on the Penglai Supreme Sect itself. Even if Mount Shu Sect cultivators are present, they won't dare make a move."

Hearing this, Hong Jufeng finally felt at ease. "That's good to hear."

There were countless islands under Starhold Island's control. The Turbid Mountain Archipelago, known for producing Mountain-Suppressing Rocks, was just one part of its vast territory. The quarrying archipelago, a small section of the Turbid Mountain Archipelago bordering the Fuyao Kingdom, wasn't particularly significant to Starhold Island on its own.

However, Starhold Island reacted so strongly because they knew that banning the Mount Shu Sect from purchasing Mountain-Suppressing Rocks would be meaningless if Red Cotton Peak could simply mine the resources themselves from the quarrying archipelago.

At its core, this was all about protecting the interests of the Penglai Supreme Sect. If Mount Shu and Starhold Island came into open conflict, the Penglai Supreme Sect would never stand by and do nothing.

In fact, it could even serve as the perfect excuse for them to wage war against the Mount Shu Sect.

The Mount Shu Sect was part of the Divine Nine, but it was ultimately just an immortal sect without a legendary artifact.

Hong Zhenyuan was filled with boundless pride. My sect is backed by the Penglai Supreme Sect and commands such powerful forces. Who in the entire East Sea would dare provoke us?

No matter what, I will make those invaders pay for what they've done!

Boom!

Towering waves surged from the sea, forming an enormous wall made of water. As the curtain of seawater fell, it revealed the massive, menacing silhouette of a beast.

The creature was completely black, with six legs and two tails. Eight twisted horns jutted from its head, and its body was covered in jagged scales. Its most striking feature was the pair of massive humps on its back, towering like mountains.

This was Hong Zhenyuan's mount—a sixth-realm Sea-Crossing Mountain-Carrying Beast. Only a creature of this size could carry someone of his massive build.

Hong Jufeng watched as the Sea-Crossing Mountain-Carrying Beast rose from the water, gritting his teeth in rage as past grudges and new reasons to hate Mount Shu flooded his mind. They had initially provoked the Mount Shu Sect because of an order from the Penglai Supreme Sect, but after suffering two humiliating defeats, he was truly angered.

"Those arrogant fools from Mount Shu..."

Yet, in the blink of an eye, his expression of anger turned to one of shock. In fact, the same was true for everyone else.

Just as the Sea-Crossing Mountain-Carrying Beast emerged from the water and Hong Zhenyuan flew toward its massive form, the beast suddenly opened its jaws wide and let out a thunderous roar.

This was a habit of the beast whenever it surfaced. But this time, a shadowy figure shot out from within its gaping maw.

The figure moved with lightning speed, barely leaving a trace. Only Hong Zhenyuan, the highest-ranked cultivator from Starhold Island and the one closest to the beast, noticed it. In an instant, the figure appeared right before him, and his thick facial muscles tensed in alarm.

Puff.

The shadowy figure gripped a sharp black saber and drove it straight into Hong Zhenyuan's chest. Though Hong Zhenyuan wore powerful armor with immense defensive strength, it was as ineffective as tofu, offering no resistance. Even his thick layer of fat did a much better job at stopping the saber.

Though Hong Zhenyuan had been caught off guard, allowing the assassin to approach and wound him, he was no ordinary opponent.

In this critical moment, the years of fat he had accumulated proved not to be in vain. When he activated his foundational qi, white mist sprayed from the countless pores on his body. His jiggly chest tensed instantly, forming a defense as strong as a city wall.

Whoosh!

The shadowy figure drove the saber into Hong Zhenyuan's chest, but his flesh managed to hold back the saber, accompanied by the harsh sound of grinding metal.

At that moment, the black saber was halfway through.

If it had been an ordinary person, having the tip of the blade sink this deep could have been life-threatening. However, with Hong Zhenyuan's large frame, the strike probably hadn't reached his internal organs. It was most likely just a superficial wound.

A sinister grin spread across his face as his hands extended wide, like two massive city gates. Then, he started swinging his arms in a circular motion.

Boom, boom!

As he clapped his hands together, a terrifying energy void[1] formed in front of his chest. The master of Starhold Island demonstrated that he too had traversed far in his cultivation of the Dao!

Yet, the figure in black did not dodge. Instead, he began to emit a glowing aura around him. In the next second, he flashed, twisted, and merged with the saber in his hand, transforming into a massive black blade.

It was Weaponized Body!

Hong Zhenyuan felt a sense of familiarity with this method, but he had no time to dwell on it. With a loud roar, he slammed his palms against the two sides of the giant blade.

Boom!

Cracks immediately appeared on both sides of the weapon transformed by the shadowy figure, suggesting that its true form had sustained serious damage. However, the figure remained unmoved.

Whoosh!

The saber's light flared violently, and the blade embedded in Hong Zhenyuan's body twisted before thrusting forward.

Puff!

A thick cloud of blood sprayed from Hong Zhenyuan's back as the black saber light didn't slow, shooting upward into the sky.

"Where do you think you're going, thief?!" two Starhold Island elders yelled.

They quickly sprang into action, unleashing their enchanted tools and divine abilities in a storm of brilliant light.

But the black saber, having withstood all the attacks, showed no sign of slowing. In the blink of an eye, it flew a thousand yards, gradually fading as it disappeared into the distant sky, leaving no trace for a thousand li!

Most of the Starhold Island's members quickly flew toward Hong Zhenyuan as cries rang out from all directions.

"Island Master!"

"Father!"

Around four cultivators worked together to catch Hong Zhenyuan while he was collapsing backward. Despite their efforts, they couldn't hold him up, and he continued to fall. Only when ten or more people worked together did they manage to catch him and prevent him from crashing on the ground.

"Father!" Hong Jufeng cried out, rushing to his father.

Hong Zhenyuan gripped his son's hand tightly as he groaned in pain. "Ugh... ah..."

His entire chest was covered in blood. The light in his eyes had already faded, leaving behind an expression of astonishment and unwillingness. No matter what, he had always seen himself as a powerful figure of the East Sea, and he never imagined his life would end in such an unexpected way.

With everything coming to an end, his massive body strained as every muscle fought to hold on.

In the end, he could only whisper two words, "Seven Killings."

Chapter 779: Assassination (II)

"You should pay your respects at the temple after taking a life. This will help regain some of the merit you've lost," a voice echoed in the ancient, quiet temple.

It was the voice of a child who appeared to be just over ten years old, dressed in a monk's robe though he had yet to be tonsured. He looked clean and handsome, with a smile on his face that made it seem as though he would never harm a soul.

Behind him stood a young man in black, fresh blood staining one side of his face. His eyes still held a lingering fierceness and coldness.

These two individuals were none other than Chu Yi and Lu Jiangtong, who were currently at the Holy Mountain in the Northern Regions.

With a devout expression and his hands pressed together in prayer, Chu Yi kneeled and bowed gently.

Lu Jiangtong, however, seemed to show some disapproval of this statement as he questioned, "What difference can such a small bow make?"

"Every little bit helps," Chu Yi said, standing up after completing his bow. He then asked, "Did everything go smoothly?"

"It went fairly smoothly. After waiting in ambush for thirteen days, the right moment finally came," Lu Jiangtong said. "One strike with the saber, and he was dead."

"It was such a coincidence. He had summoned his mount because the Fuyao Kingdom seized a few small islands," Chu Yi said. "The one who made this happen is the Mount Shu Sect."

"Also, the cultivation legacy of the Seven Killings that you're cultivating—I found it in the Mount Shu Sect's Hall of Conservation."

"And then there's me..."

Chu Yi walked out of the temple, heading to the top of the Holy Mountain, where the green fields were blanketed by white snow. Looking up at the sky, he sighed softly, "We are still receiving favors from him..."

"That dear senior brother of yours?" Lu Jiangtong asked.

A powerful seventh-realm cultivator couldn't possibly be assassinated so easily—unless the assassin was also at the seventh realm.

Ever since Chu Yi ascended the Holy Mountain, the rebels of Mount Mang had settled down under his command. He then gave Lu Jiangtong a cultivation manual, instructing him to practice diligently and transition from being a warrior to an assassin.

Lu Jiangtong carried the bloodline of a demon. Those with demon blood who had yet to fully transform often possessed extraordinary talent for cultivation. His progress was swift, and he mastered divine abilities at twice the speed of others. Before long, he became a successful assassin.

"My senior brother is so capable that I can spend my whole life studying his ways, but I'll never master them," Chu Yi said with a sigh. "So I always end up relying on schemes and strategies."

Lu Jiangtong clicked his tongue. "This way is much more convenient. We take them out one by one, and soon, no one will be left to challenge us."

Chu Yi chuckled softly. "You weren't like this before. When you led the Mount Mang disciples on your own, you were brave and strategic."

Lu Jiangtong fell silent for a moment.

Recently, he realized he had begun acting without much thought. It seemed that after getting used to following someone else, he no longer cared to think for himself.

This was a terrifying realization.

However, he had to admit that back when he led the rebels of Mount Mang, he had been cautious and meticulous. His saber's edge was always sharp, and he was struggling tirelessly to survive every day. Yet, ever since he started sharing a brain with Chu Yi, life had become much easier for him.

Perhaps there was something even more reassuring than relying on a powerful figure—relying on an intelligent person.

"We've already struck Starhold Island, so there's no need to target the Great Lunar Dao Sect," Chu Yi explained. "Since you used the Heavenly Star Unusual Art to kill Hong Zhenyuan, they'll naturally assume it was the work of the Heavenly Star's splinter factions. In the end, they'll turn on each other. With a single kill, we eliminate two enemies."

"Let the people from the Ice Soul Sword Sect clash with the Buddhist sect."

"And let the War Tomb Mountain deal with the Yushan Academy."

"Leverage one force against another force and identify each opponent's weakness as we go with the flow. Then, we dismantle them with the least effort."

Chu Yi said all that with clear logic and a calm, natural tone, showing no hint of arrogance.

Lu Jiangtong listened, nodding thoughtfully before asking, "What about the Talismanic Sect?"

"..." This time, it was Chu Yi's turn to fall silent.

In the Terrestrial Ten's Sect Selection, he knew every opponent's weakness. It was only the Talismanic Sect that confused him.

He didn't even know about this sect, let alone its weaknesses. And he was not the only one.

A few days ago, the Talismanic Sect gained some recognition during the 'Male and Female Cultivators, Charge Forward' event organized by Red Cotton Peak. While talisman masters on the market took the opportunity to raise their prices, this suddenly emerging sect continued selling at standard rates, refusing to charge their dear friends and family even a single extra spirit-stone coin. Their actions instantly won them the favor of those who had never heard of them before.

As Chu Yi pondered their approach, he couldn't shake the feeling that it seemed oddly familiar.

He knew someone quite well who often advertised and promoted using the phrase "dear friends and family."^[1]

His dear senior brother had never run a business for profit. He spent his life "benefiting his dear friends and family" yet somehow became the wealthiest man on Mount Shu and a major figure in the world of immortal cultivation.

And this Talismanic Sect happened to be nominated by the Mount Shu Sect to participate in the Selection of a Terrestrial Ten Sect.

As for the connection between the Talismanic Sect and the Mount Shu Sect, Chu Yi couldn't quite figure it out.

The Talismanic Sect had neither renowned Eminent Ones nor powerful cultivators. It lacked great forces and had no long-standing cultivation legacy. Their participation in the Selection of a Terrestrial Ten Sect felt like nothing more than a joke.

The reason Chu Yi couldn't pinpoint its weakness was simple—everything about it was a weakness.

Yet, because this sect was nominated by the Mount Shu Sect, he didn't dare to look down on it for even one bit. He felt that this was most likely Chu Liang's doing. After all, he could never predict what his senior brother wanted to do.

After a long pause, Chu Yi finally smiled.

"If it comes down to us and the Mount Shu Sect, does it really matter if we let them have it?"

...

While the world outside was in upheaval over the Selection of a Terrestrial Ten Sect, Chu Liang was delivering a speech with unwavering passion.

"Dear friends and family, who can truly understand our struggles? Ever since the Hall of Construction of the Mount Shu Sect began accepting commissions, we have never dared to forget our responsibilities. After working tirelessly for so long, we can finally begin construction! Today is the day that we start the construction of the first fifty Feng-grade buildings!

"Though our delay was caused solely by someone maliciously restricting our access to the Mountain-Suppressing Rock Quarry, we at Red Cotton Peak will still take full responsibility. Any sect affected by the delay will receive an exclusive 20% discount voucher from Red Cotton Peak!"

Having remained idle since the supply of Mountain-Suppressing Rocks was cut off, the Hall of Construction was finally back in operation.

Li Wanda, Li Wanke, Chen Baoli, and Fang Zhonghai beamed with joy, rolling up their sleeves and throwing themselves into their work with enthusiasm.

Meanwhile, Bi Guiyuan could only watch eagerly, yearning for the day Chu Liang would finally acknowledge his abilities. However, until he could construct buildings that met the required standards, Chu Liang had no intention of letting him out there and putting the reputation of Mount Shu's Hall of Construction at risk.

At the same time, the Talismanic Sect's affordable talismans were steadily gaining traction in the market. Initially, the well-established talisman shops that had increased their prices dismissed the competition. They believed that with demand so high, the Talismanic Sect's success would be inconsequential. After all, there was no way a single sect could meet the needs of every cultivator. Sooner or later, its stock would be depleted, and when that happened, buyers would have no choice but to return to the overpriced talismans of the well-established talisman shops.

However, after the past few days, those shops were starting to panic. How was it that the Talismanic Sect's talismans just... never seemed to run out? Not only had they met their own demand, but they had also siphoned away a significant portion of their competitors' customers. Even as this was happening, they showed no sign of slowing down.

While the owners of those old shops were still grumbling to themselves, oblivious to the dawn of a new era, Chu Liang finally let out a sigh of relief. With the Talismanic Sect shaping up to be a cash cow, the immense burden on Red Cotton Peak to expand its market finally lightened.

Still, Chu Liang reminded his team, "Even though we now have a stable source of Mountain-Suppressing Rock, we still need to slow down our pace. We should only build when there's demand and charge only after completion. We must not get ahead of ourselves. The supply of Mountain-Suppressing Rock isn't entirely stable, and there's always the risk of being cut off due to external forces. There are risks."

"But since we already have orders, why not collect payments upfront?" Lackey A asked in confusion. "We were short on funds not long ago, so why not ask for a portion of the payment first? If our supply of Mountain-Suppressing Rock gets cut off and we can't deliver the buildings, the buyers should share some of the risk with us. Wouldn't that make things a lot easier on our end?"

Chu Liang gave him a big thumbs-up. "And if we still can't deliver, we just take the money and run, right?"

Well now, Lackey A. That was a downright heartless suggestion.

Chu Liang could already picture himself sneaking away while Mount Shu was overrun by furious buyers from the Divine Nine and the Terrestrial Ten, banners waving as they protested in outrage. It would be... quite the spectacle.

"Can we guarantee that we'll complete every order?" Chu Liang asked as he looked at Lackey A in a serious manner. "If we can't, then why should someone who just wants a single building bear that much risk?"

"We can run promotions, develop new products, and find ways to cut costs, but we can't ignore our conscience. We must always remember that money lost can be earned back, but if we betray our conscience..."

...we can make even more money.

Chu Liang paused, swallowing those words that were right at the tip of his tongue.

Instead, he slowly said, "Then we would no longer be human."

Chapter 780: I Have My Own Plans (I)

On Starhold Island, white mourning garments fluttered in the wind.

With a solemn expression, Hong Jufeng, clad in mourning attire over a suit of armor, sat before his father's memorial tablet. As he gazed at Hong Zhenyuan's coffin, his eyes burned with hatred.

A sect elder stepped into the mourning hall.

"Young Master..." he said, hesitating for a moment. Eventually, he still decided to say, "The banquet has begun."

Before Hong Zhenyuan was assassinated, he had been preparing to launch an attack on the quarrying archipelago. Coincidentally, their forces stationed on the outer islands had been recalled. Though they had not been able to help capture the assassin, they came back at the right time to help prepare for the banquet, making the arrangements much more convenient.

The entire Starhold Island had been bustling with preparations throughout the night. By dawn, the funeral arrangements were complete. The white cloth was draped over the body, and the deceased was properly placed in the coffin, sealed and ready for burial. The island fell into a hush. Now, all that remained was to await the banquet.

"I'm not going," Hong Jufeng said, shaking his head and casting his gaze downward in sorrow. "I am not in the mood to eat."

Kneeling on the ground, he sat there like a sorrowful mountain of flesh.

Another close attendant of the island stepped forward and earnestly persuaded, "Young Master! persuading him. You've only eaten a suckling pig, a pot of meat porridge, two baskets of dimsum, and four bowls of meat soup since yesterday... That's not even enough for a single meal by your usual standards! You are already becoming skinny! Even if you're grieving your father's passing, you have to eat something...

"Aside from avenging my father, nothing else matters to me. If I don't take revenge for my own father, how can I call myself a man?!" Hong Jufeng declared furiously.

Suddenly, he paused, twitched his nose twice, then whispered, "Did you guys make roasted lamb?"

The attendant replied, "They're all golden lambs from the Western Regions. When roasted, they are richly marbled, fragrant, and irresistibly tender. They were originally meant for the victory feast, but since the funeral banquet is today, we're serving them now. Shall I set aside three to five lamb legs for you? Just enough to tide you over?"

Hong Jufeng maintained a stoic expression but responded quickly, "Add more garlic."

"Understood."

The attendant went to make the preparations.

Two elders of the sect approached Hong Jufeng and advised him, "Young Master, skipping proper meals all the time is not the way to handle this. That assassin is highly skilled and moves like a shadow. We don't know when he'll be caught. If you keep this up, your body will give out before the day of revenge even arrives."

Hong Jufeng turned his gaze past the doorframe, his expression ice-cold as he looked into the distance. "Esteemed Elders, I may be young, but I am not a naive child. Since that assassin used the Seven Stealthy Killings Transcendent Form, it means that he cultivates the Heavenly Star Unusual Art. It may be difficult to track who cultivates the legacy of the Seven Killings Star, but only a handful of factions broke away from the Heavenly Star Divine Cult, aren't there?

"The Celestial King Sect, the Celestial Pivot Pavilion, the Sea King Sect..." Hong Jufeng gritted his teeth as he listed his enemies. "The factions that branched off from the Heavenly Star Divine Cult have long regarded us as traitors. And now, with the selection for the Terrestrial Ten, we are the

only ones capable of standing against the Great Lunar Dao Sect. To them, we are a thorn in their side and an obstacle that must be removed.

"But of all the things they could have done, they should never... never have laid a hand on my father!"

Several elders hastily warned, "Young Master, you mustn't speak so recklessly. Those sects hold the status of the Divine Nine and Terrestrial Ten. How can we make such accusations without proof? Even if we know the truth..."

One of the elders let out a long sigh and muttered, "But what can we do about it?"

All of them sighed, feeling like they wanted to do something but lacked the strength to do so.

Not even their backer, the Penglai Supreme Sect, would recklessly wage war against the factions that branched off from the Heavenly Star Divine Cult, let alone a small island like Starhold Island.

The truth was that the Penglai Supreme Sect could never extend its influence into the land of the nine provinces. Aside from the imperial court being the greatest obstacle, powerful alliances like the Heavenly Star factions also stood in the way.

"For now, we will set those sects aside," Hong Jufeng declared firmly. "But we must act against the quarrying archipelago! If we hadn't planned to attack it, my father would never have given the assassin a chance. It is hard to strike down our true enemies, but we can start with the quarrying archipelago. This will be the first step in avenging my father!"

The sect elders exchanged glances before nodding. "That sounds doable..."

Compared to the factions that branched off from the Heavenly Star Divine Cult, the small number of Fuyao soldiers at the quarrying archipelago were nothing more than easy targets that were ripe for the taking. Even if a few Mount Shu Sect's disciples were present, what could they possibly do?

The actual powerhouses of the Mount Shu Sect were well-known figures who would never openly interfere in the affairs on the East Sea. As for any nameless disciples who might be lingering there, Starhold Island could sweep in and slaughter them freely.

With Hong Zhenyuan dead and Starhold Island on shaky ground, a war was just what they needed to show the world the authority and strength of the new leader. If they failed to establish their authority now, forces from all sides would soon move in and test their strength.

The quarrying archipelago was the perfect target to achieve this goal.

Hong Jufeng suddenly stood up and declared in a resolute tone, "Gather all our brothers here and let us fulfill my father's final wish. We will attack the quarrying archipelago and kill everyone there!"

Suddenly, someone called out, "Young Master, the lamb legs are ready—"

A group of attendants arrived at the mourning hall, carrying several large golden-brown roasted lamb legs, their glistening juices dripping onto the trays.

"Heh." Hong Jufeng let out a cold smirk. "The lamb legs are perfectly roasted but still too hot. By the time I return from conquering the Quarrying Archipelago, they'll be just right for eating!"

...

The quarrying archipelago was shrouded in thick, eerie mist.

At the peak of a mountain, Grand Ancestor Fuyou sat cross-legged, eyes closed as he activated and circulated his cultivation energy.

With each breath, countless red specks of light drifted in and out of his nose and mouth. In no time, the mist around him deepened, swirling into a dense, ominous cloud.

A thin fog covered the island, making the the island feel even more eerie than before. Fortunately, there weren't many people on the island. Aside from the massive Mountain-Drilling Beast and a small group of miners refining spirit stones underground, only Du Wuhen remained on the surface to accompany Grand Ancestor Fuyou.

Within the crimson fog, a tall, shadowy figure stood motionless, making the scene even more unsettling.

This was the eerie sight that greeted the approaching forces of Starhold Island from afar. However, the moment they set foot on the island, everything changed.

Sensing a large group of cultivators approaching, Grand Ancestor Fuyou took a deep breath, drawing all the red mist back into his body. He then said, "I don't know who's here, but don't scare them."

"I'll go check it out," Du Wuhen said and leaped into the air. Moments later, he swiftly returned to Grand Ancestor Fuyou's side and reported, "Little Second Brother, they come with ill intent."

"Elder Brother, don't worry. I'll see for myself," Grand Ancestor Fuyou reassured.

In the distance, massive beasts surged like tidal waves, while fierce birds filled the sky. The elite forces of Starhold Island swarmed in, their sheer numbers darkening the heavens. Leading the charge, Hong Jufeng was the first to land on the island, only to be met by an unusual sight—an old man and a shadowy figure standing in silence.

Behind him, several powerful cultivators followed closely, striding forward with determined steps.

Hong Jufeng fixed his gaze on Grand Ancestor Fuyou and asked, "Did the island's inhabitants flee before we arrived?"

"They did not," Grand Ancestor Fuyou replied with a smile. "This island is remote, and few people live here to begin with. But such a grand visit with so many people must mean you have important business here. If it's not too much trouble, would you be willing to share what it is? After all, I was entrusted with watching over this place."

Hong Jufeng stared at him and suddenly scoffed, "Heh."

Grand Ancestor Fuyou was worried of scaring others so he kept the demonic qi within him restrained. At this moment, he was like an old man who was timid and feeble.

A sect elder from Starhold Island said with a sneer, "So, the Fuyao Kingdom and the Mount Shu Sect have finally learned to fear us. They only left behind a feeble old watchman to guard this place."

"Pffft!"

Laughter filled the air. Before it could die down, Hong Jufeng flipped his hand, revealing a golden pestle. Without a moment's hesitation, he plunged it into Grand Ancestor Fuyou's chest.

"Little Second Brother!" Du Wuhen cried out in shock.

Hong Jufeng spoke coldly, his tone dripping with malice. "If you seek revenge, take it against the one who left you here."

With a sharp pull, he yanked the golden pestle out.

Just as he was about to step over the corpse and continue forward, something unexpected happened. The old man did not fall. He remained standing exactly as before, his expression unchanged, with only a slight flicker of confusion in his gaze.

Though his chest bore a gaping hole, not a single drop of blood spilled. Instead, tiny specks of red light shimmered around the wound, steadily knitting it back together.

"Young man, I bear you no grudge. Why did you attack me?" Grand Ancestor Fuyou said with a sigh. "That is very improper behavior."

He shook his head. "Moreover, you were the one who attacked me, yet you tell me to seek revenge elsewhere? Also, hatred is not a good thing."

As Hong Jufeng stood frozen in bewilderment, struggling to grasp what he was witnessing,

Grand Ancestor Fuyou said, "If you have some things to discuss, you may speak to me. If it is within my power, I—"

Splurt.

Before Grand Ancestor Fuyou could finish his sentence, Hong Jufeng thrust the pestle into his stomach again.

As he pulled the golden pestle out once more, another gaping hole was left behind, with flickering red light once again gathering at the wound.

As if nothing had happened, Grand Ancestor Fuyou continued, "If it is within my power, I will help you. Why do you keep attacking me? Can't we resolve this by communicating? Why do we have to fight?"

"If I have done something wrong... or even if I haven't, I can still apologize to you first. Could you please stop—"

Splurt.

This time, Hong Jufeng drove the golden pestle straight through Grand Ancestor Fuyou's forehead, gouging out half his face and leaving yet another gaping hole.

Behind him, Du Wuhen could no longer stand by and watch. He stepped forward and declared, "This is the territory of the Mount Shu Sect's Red Cotton Peak. We were entrusted to guard this place. If you're looking for trouble, I suggest you take it elsewhere."

"Hmph!" Hong Jufeng snorted and shouted, "Then you're exactly who I came to kill! Brothers, come ashore and kill everyone!"

If it had been only Hong Jufeng, Du Wuhen would have felt no fear. But there was an entire army descending upon them, countless powerful cultivators advancing in unison. How could he possibly withstand such an onslaught?

Immediately, he was forced to retreat midair by this wave of qi. While that was happening, he shouted, "Little Second Brother, act now!"

Boom!

Before he could even glance back, Grand Ancestor Fuyou had already been trampled under a massive beast's hooves, his body crushed into a formless mess, like a lump of mud.

Since the Azure Mysterious Wind Bird had left him, Du Wuhen's combat strength had been cut in half. Immediately, he fell into great danger. Teetering on the brink of death, he could only call out for his Little Second Brother's help.

Had he kept silent, perhaps the forces of the Starhold Island would have remained wary of the old man. After all, this old man seemed rather strange.

Nevertheless, the more Du Wuhen cried for help, the more reassured Hong Jufeng and his men became. After all, Du Wuhen was only at the peak of the sixth realm. How powerful could his younger brother possibly be?

Where in the world would a younger brother be stronger than his elder brother?

Yet, as they continued their relentless assault on Du Wuhen, the splattered remains of Grand Ancestor Fuyou suddenly began to emit faint flickers of red light, like scattered fireflies in the dark. One by one, the crimson specks rose into the air, merging into a dense mist of blood-red qi.

It was just like what happened on Misty Island once before.

In the span of a single breath, every Starhold Island disciple who had stepped onto Quarrying Island was completely engulfed by the eerie red glow.

There seemed to be a soft murmuring in the mist. It sounded like the voice of the devil itself. A chilling whisper slithered into their ears, creeping into their very souls.

But if they dared to step deeper into the mist, they would soon realize what was actually being said.

"Why do you insist on attacking me? Isn't this all so unnecessary? Wouldn't it be nicer if everyone was just a little more polite?"